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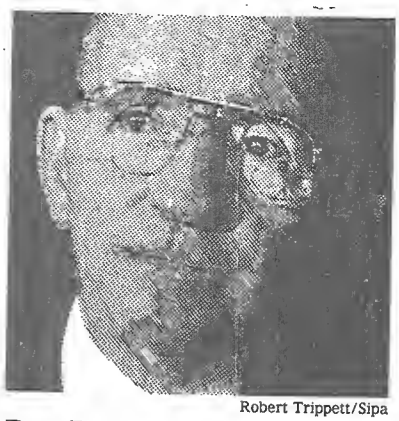
BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Ross Perot Will Not Like This Book

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN



Robert Trippett/Sipa

Ross Perot

CITIZEN PEROT
His Life and Times

By Gerald Posner

Illustrated. 400 pages. Random House. $25.

Everybody remembers when Ross Perot quit the Presidential race in 1992 after having assembled a campaign team in every state of the union. "The Yellow Ross of Texas" was the headline in one newspaper after Mr. Perot's sudden withdrawal. "The Quitter," Newsweek called him. Everybody next remembers that Mr. Perot reversed himself two months later and became a candidate after all, eventually winning 19 percent of the popular vote, the best third-party showing since Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose campaign of 1912.

What fewer people know is what is revealed in Gerald Posner's scrupulous, well-researched biography of Mr. Perot, out just in time for the 1996 Presidential campaign. During the 70 days that Mr. Perot was out of the 1992 race, the book relates, "Federal Election Commission records reveal that he spent $11 million in maintaining petition drives and establishing state organizations that could be turned into campaign offices on a moment's notice." In that period, Mr. Perot spent more money in August ($4 million) than he did during any of the previous months when he was a candidate.

That tidbit suggests the complicated man who is more broadly portrayed in Mr. Posner's book, as well as the author's exhaustive research techniques. Mr. Posner is the kind of biographer who strives to let the data tell the tale, a model that he has followed in several other books, most notably "Case Closed" in 1993, his stunning, hammer-blow refutation of the various Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. In his new book, Mr. Posner has assembled a huge amount of data on Mr. Perot, and he presents it in brisk, readable form.

There are some things Mr. Posner's data do not reveal: what kind of husband and father Mr. Perot is, or what kind of friend, or even what he really believes in in the way of a political program for the nation, or how he came to his views. This book is about the public Ross Perot, not the private one. It is the story of the man who made a rapid fortune in computerized data processing, who mounted a bold, reckless rescue operation when two of his employees were imprisoned in Iran, who waged a tireless, stubborn campaign on behalf of American soldiers he imagined still missing in action in Indochina, and who made more than $1.5 billion being taken over by General Motors and then being paid to leave when he turned out to be too harshly critical of his new partners' way of doing business.

"Citizen Perot," in short, is about an eventful public life. Overall, despite its subject's larger-than-life aspect, it will not be good for the man who recently announced his intention to run again as a third-party candidate for the Presidency. As Mr. Posner portrays him, Mr. Perot is certainly entrepreneurial, quick on his feet and daring. But Mr. Perot also emerges as prone to temper tantrums, to deceitfulness in the service of his cause, to dogmatism and to deafness to contrary opinions as well as to contrary facts. He is a man of many wrongheaded certitudes, and he is given to a paranoia that puts him in Richard Nixon's league, if not in some still higher category.

It is not that Mr. Posner states these conclusions himself, so eager is he to leave himself out of the picture, to simply report the facts. That approach has its virtues, though one wishes that the author in this case were not quite so chary of sharing his judgments with us, especially the judgments he formed through several long interviews with Mr. Perot. The last chapters of this book read like a Vanity Fair profile, telling the interesting story of Mr. Perot's zany 1992 race not so much through the filter of his own critical intelligence but by indefatigably gathering quotations from numerous sources involved in the campaign.

There are more details in this section of the book than many readers will want to know about Mr. Perot, Mr. Posner being more likely to put something into his story than to leave it out. Still, the 1992 race makes for a savory tale, especially as Mr. Posner unearths the details about Mr. Perot's strange credulousness when told wild stories by a couple of soldier-of-fortune types who insinuated themselves into his confidence. According to Mr. Posner, one of these men, discredited by most reasonable people who came into contact with him, told Mr. Perot that the Republicans were about to release false but compromising pictures of his daughter Carolyn. Mr. Perot believed the story, or else he latched onto it as a way to justify his abrupt withdrawal from that campaign. In any case, it is a good example of the way Mr. Perot's life is tinged with compulsive attachments to wrong ideas, to making unsubstantiated accusations, to believing in a vast conspiracy out there to get him.

"When you look into the prisoner cover-up, you find government officials in the drug trade who can't break themselves of the habit," Mr. Perot once told a reporter in an off-the-record conversation. The comment was made in one of Mr. Perot's compulsive moods, when he became convinced, against all the evidence, that the Central Intelligence Agency and the White House were covering up the truth about the missing in action in Indochina — namely, in Mr. Perot's view, that there were substantial numbers of former soldiers being kept as labor slaves there. Mr. Posner's detailed recounting of that story is a chilling object lesson in Mr. Perot's worst traits of credulousness, paranoia and fanatical conviction.

In all, Mr. Posner, who started researching this book when most of the press had lost interest in Mr. Perot, has performed a useful public service with this exposé. Anybody who is thinking of voting for the charismatic Texas billionaire ought to read it.